

## Of people and politicians

**You pride yourself on the thought that over the last 16 years or so, this vast majority voted you to power, and what did these harmless and naïve voters get in return? Peanuts, in real terms! While you basked in the new found power to loot and plunder the wealth of the nation, you either deceived them into electing you or you bought them into choosing you!**

S. I. ZAMAN

WE are weary of politicians like Hannan, Delwar et al, and Zillur, Suranjit et al fuming at the CTG with their cliché-ridden rhetoric on how the nation would go to the dogs unless the parliamentary election was held at the earliest opportunity. Some of these noted leaders have nothing much to say except, "early restoration of democracy is imperative for the nation's health" -- as though democracy is a totka or a quick medicine your granny or your mum used to give you when you were sick as a child!

My message to them; people are tired of your silly antics, rhetoric and ranting. Your persuasion tactics don't hold water. People can see through you now, how implausible you now look and sound. You delude yourself in thinking that you are still a force to reckon with. And you brag of being the main party, which has the support of 99% of the electorate! But, whose 90% (a

conservative estimate) consists mostly of rural based uneducated farmers and barga chashi, who have no notion of democracy (let alone democratic rights) or, indeed, what it means to be a voter. You pride yourself on the thought that over the last 16 years or so, this vast majority voted you to power, and what did these harmless and naïve voters get in return? Peanuts, in real terms! While you basked in the new found power to loot and plunder the wealth of the nation, you either deceived them into electing you or you bought them into choosing you!

As for your leader-centric and leader-worshipping mentality, sadi, you haven't changed an iota. Given so much criticism lately about the undemocratic practices within the mainstream parties, one would have thought that the party sycophants should have learnt by now not to sound too "devotional" about their leaders who are now languishing in jail. In case you missed it, your endless adulation, devotion and

focus on your netri (leader) has blinded you to the reality, which is the greater good for the nation. You seem to have this aura of evangelical zeal that, "come what may! Netri must be freed at any cost!" What if your netri is convicted and serves a prison sentence, would you still carry on with your asinine devotion and try to make a national hero out of her?

It is inexplicable that, while the present administration has been fervidly clear about how the corrupt practices within the mainstream parties have devoured the very core and essence of this nation, none of you has come out (as yet) with a clear-cut statement or, indeed, a pledge that you will henceforth end all forms of unilateral corrupt practices, that you will make sure such vile practices are shunned by all, and that you will have the courage to stand up against your leader and correct him or her if ever he or she is deemed to have "crossed the line" (politically or morally). Sadly, we haven't heard any of these! Yet, you go on

with your blasé political rhetoric which only serves to demean you more.

You talk of lifting emergency rule once and for all -- well, who will benefit the most -- the people? The vast majority of the downtrodden people? No! It's you and the ones in your league who are zealously seeking a way out to reap the benefit -- the first order of the day would be to get a mob (with dandas, lathis, clubs, and perhaps hand grenades) out on the streets of Dhaka to free your netri. This would be executed somewhat dexterously as you and your acolytes are so adept at it. Then you would do your utmost to launch a reign of terror so that the EC would be compelled to declare a firm date for the general election.

Of course, these are tactics you are so at home with! And why do I sound so harsh, with not a kind word for our politicians? Well, over the last 13 months, we haven't seen or heard anything significant, which gives the impression that our politicians have reformed themselves and metamorphosed into a new mind-set, conducive to a 21st century type setting -- sadly, nothing like that ever happened!

The types of noises you are making are indubitably reminiscent of what you were before 1/11 -- "party reform" has thoroughly

lost its connotation -- there isn't an iota of any significant change in your party constitution, party set-up or, indeed, in the mind-set of politicians such as you -- and you still seem to thrive in the banal notion of "monolithic" leader-centrism! For you, it seems, party interests should outweigh national interests, and the interests of your netri should eclipse all else! Is this position tenable?

You talk of democracy as though the very absence of it is the only ill that plagues Bangladesh -- but did you ever practice democracy within your party? Your party's track record says otherwise -- you managed, and were happy to carry on, the tradition of leader-centrism in your party. Despite your leader's culpable unilateral decisions and corrupt practices, none of you ever questioned the wisdom of your leader, none of you ever had the courage to stand up for the people's aspirations, the very people who voted you in power!

Your netris (BNP and AL) thus far have been perceived by a vast majority to be inept, incompetent and unfit to lead your parties, or indeed any political party, with a true spirit of democracy and patriotism -- but did any of you dare to criticise, oppose or speak up for the greater good of the party and, indeed, for the greater good of this nation?



Your petulant and persistent demand for an early election only helps to show your resolve to capture power at the earliest opportunity -- and the word "election" has become a currency for fulfilling your ulterior design in power play -- can you not also demand a fast-track process by which tens of thousands of farmers around the country could receive their much needed fertilizers, seeds and other

agricultural help in due time? Can you not also demand improved government health care so your netris wouldn't be in this dire situation (health-wise)? Can you not also demand improved primary education? Can you not see a need for a universal social security system, which would protect the unemployed, homeless, sick and destitute? And, can you not demand, unequivocally, the for-

mulation of a much-awaited Citizen's Charter?

I want to be able to believe that the upcoming general election is indeed a light at the end of the tunnel. But can we honestly trust you to run the country once again? And run it good? Can you, once and for all, not deceive the electorate, and keep the promises that you make in your election manifesto?

Dr. S. I. Zaman, is a university professor.

## The environment is our future

**Commonwealth states share the same dilemma. We need to find a way to grow and develop our economies without destabilising the climate, and destroying the foundations that underpin our growth, stability and development.**

GORDON BROWN

I am delighted to be providing this message for Commonwealth Day (March 10) -- the day when the UK reflects on its Commonwealth membership and heritage, and looks ahead to the challenges facing us and our fellow member states.

This year's Commonwealth Day theme is "The Environment Our Future" -- it could not be more relevant -- we all have to take

urgent action today to guarantee tomorrow's future.

Commonwealth states share the same dilemma. We need to find a way to grow and develop our economies without destabilising the climate, and destroying the foundations that underpin our growth, stability and development. The only way out is, together, to build a low carbon global economy as soon as we can.

I was delighted to be able to take part in key climate change

discussions with my fellow heads of government at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM) in Uganda in November. The Commonwealth brings together a critical cross-section of countries -- industrialised countries with significant greenhouse gas emissions, emerging economies, energy producers and poor and vulnerable states, some of whose very survival is directly threatened by climate change.



We launched the Lake Victoria Action Plan on Climate Change at CHOGM -- a major statement from a quarter of the world, highlighting the urgency and gravity of

the situation. I was delighted that we were able to commit, in the action plan, to pursuing ambitious solutions, in particular through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, to promoting a better understanding of climate change and its impact and in addressing mitigation and adaptation challenges.

I look forward to working further with my fellow Commonwealth Heads of Government over the coming months to help deliver our action plan and achieve these goals. In particular, I want to continue to develop a shared understanding of what climate change will mean for our economies and societies;

to draw on Commonwealth networks, so that we can explore the economic, social, and health opportunities, particularly for developing countries, of a transition to low carbon; and to continue to build on the consensus we reached at CHOGM amongst Commonwealth states that a key component of our collective response must be to agree an ambitious and effective post-2012 global framework to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and a shared vision of what that agreement should include.

I wish you all a very happy Commonwealth Day.

Gordon Brown is Prime Minister of the UK. The above was his Commonwealth Day 2008 message.

## First impressions

In July 2009, Bradt Travel Guides will release a new travel guidebook for Bangladesh around the world. A group of five international travel writers and travel agents, including the book author, is currently exploring Bangladesh's tourism potential. Their goal is to explore Bangladesh's tourism potential. What follows is part one of the trip diary.

MIKEY LEUNG

IT's a foggy morning in Dhaka, and our trip, months in the planning, gets off to a slow start. Travel writer Nick Redmayne, our first arrival, is delayed due to fog, and his plane is rerouted to Chiang Mai for a three-hour delay before it makes the journey to Dhaka. Then, luggage claims slow things down even further.

Nick calls me from his UK mobile to apologise: six hours after his scheduled arrival time he has still not tasted open Bangladeshi air. I tell him that he's getting his first traffic jam experience of Bangladesh. Finally he's out, and thankfully holding on to his jolly

sense of humour. On first glance, he reminds me of a professor from a Harry Potter movie, with his turtle-coloured plastic rim glasses and wide, welcoming smile.

"Bengalis are, surprisingly, a very relaxed people," says Nick, after spending a few hours wandering around Dhanmondi on his own. "They are at ease with the presence of foreigners, intrigued. I'm so used to people not wanting their photograph taken, it's a little overwhelming when it's constantly demanded. It's the friendly interest of the people that is my most immediate impression."

**Jack and Nicole arrive**

Thankfully, the next day the sky is

clear and our next two writers, Jack Barker and Nicole Kobie, arrive with much less hassle, although Airport Road gives them their first taste of Dhaka's traffic which Nicole, a younger journalist from London with a no-nonsense disposition, describes as "scary." But both are immediately taken with the curiosity of Bangladeshi people.

"I don't usually know what to say about my impressions until a week after I get home," adds Jack. After a moment's ponder he offered: "It's so unusual to get such a friendly level of interest everywhere you go, not even in India do you get that."

"Everyone stares," says Nicole of

her first impression. "It's a little disconcerting at first, but soon you realise it is just curiosity and not anything hostile."

After a spot of rest, I take Jack and Nicole to Road 11 in Banani for phuchka at Dhaba -- Jack is delighted as he hasn't had one for years and cannot seem to find them in London anymore.

"I used to have them in Tooting, which is an Indian part of London," says Jack, who is definitely the most experienced travel writer in our troupe, the only one of who truly writes for a living. "But it will probably be another 30 years before I find that again."

"That was great food," says Nicole. "It puts everything to shame in Brick Lane."

Nicole also buys her first shalwar tops at Deshal, and later tells me she wasn't expecting to see boutique-style shopping in Bangladesh, easily of a standard that could sell in London.

I don't want to tire our Nicole and Jack too much on their first

day, so I decide to take them for a little boat ride on Gulshan Lake, and on a whim, I decide to take them into the slum area near TNT. Immediately, we are surrounded by dozens of lively children, who hold our hands as we walk and giggle with the experience of meeting some intrepid foreigners.

"Those kids were extremely cute," says Nicole. "They just wanted to practise their English and have some fun, the same as children anywhere else in the world."

**Evening train to Chittagong** Part of the intention of the trip is to have our group experience local travel in Bangladesh. By far and away, local travel is dominated by the bus in Bangladesh, but why hurry around so much?

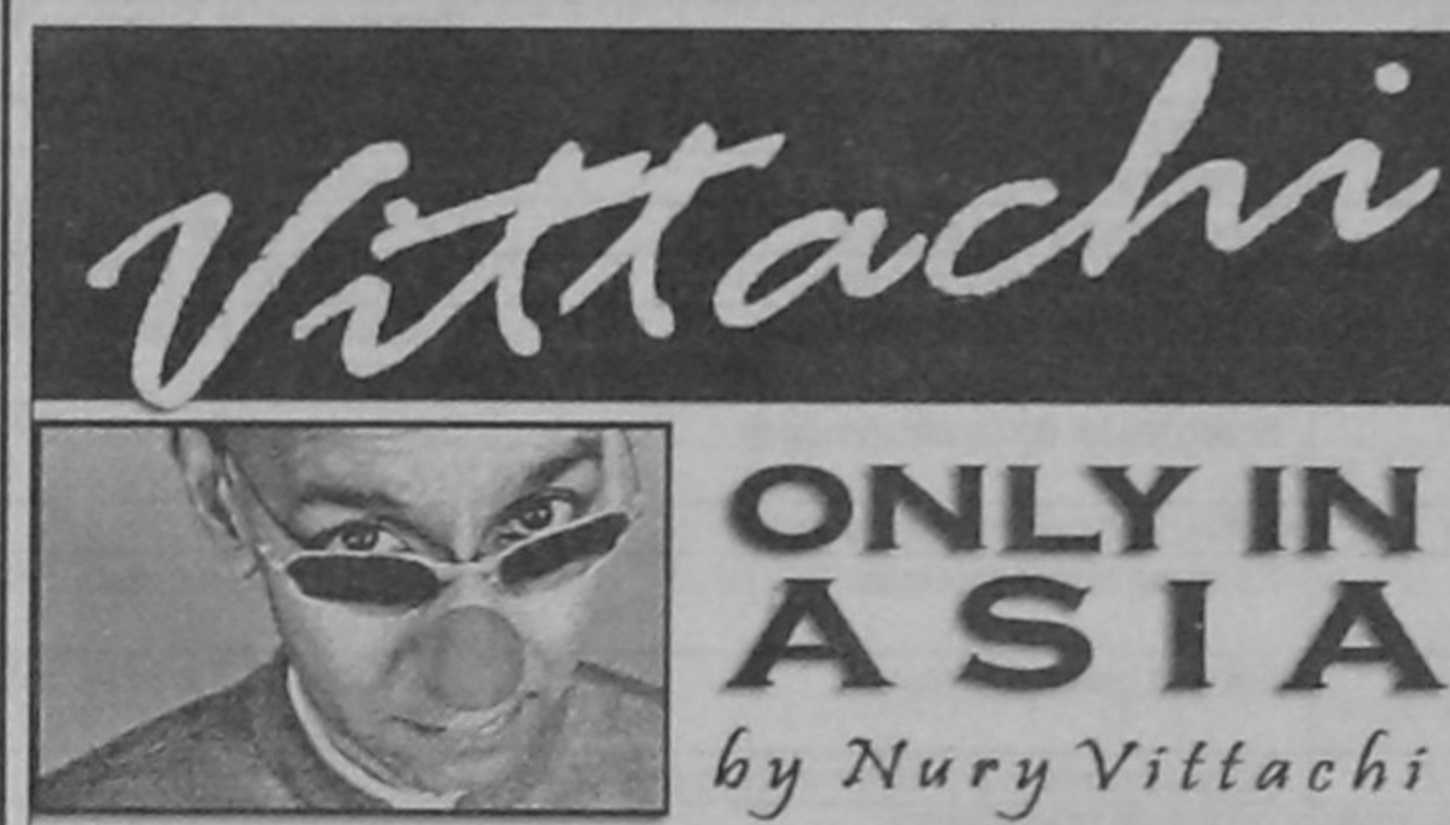
Instead we decide to take a more leisurely route to Bandarban, first by taking the evening train to Chittagong. Guide Tours manages to get us first class AC train tickets, and the group is pleased when we arrive to an upholstered sleeper

berth.

"I thought the train was excellent, and the professionalism of the train staff was good," says Jack. "It was on time, and the staff here seem take their work very seriously."

"I love taking the train in Bangladesh," adds Mikey. "Yes, it's not the fastest way to get there but it's certainly the most enjoyable. Travel should be a pleasure, not a nerve-wracking experience. I've had my share of public busses in Bangladesh, so I take a launch or a train whenever I possibly can."

For a nation whose international image is often framed in poverty, natural disasters and corruption, Bangladesh: the Bradt Travel Guide will represent a milestone in Mikey Leung's attempts to change Bangladesh's world image when it is published in 2009. To begin promotion of Bangladesh as a tourism destination, Bradt Travel Guides, with the assistance of Guide Tours and Green House Bed and Breakfast, has organised a promotional tour of Bangladesh for a select group of travel writers and agents, who will publish a series of articles internationally, mostly in the United Kingdom. To learn more about Bradt's guidebook project, please visit <http://www.joybangla.info>. Mikey Leung can be reached at [mikeyleung.ca@gmail.com](mailto:mikeyleung.ca@gmail.com).



## When we had Sars in our eyes

ONE OF THE NASTIEST flu bugs for years is now doing the rounds of Asia, exactly five years after the region was hit by Sars. In fact, it was five years ago today that a friend of mine hustled her kids to the airport. "Adios," she said. "I'm taking the kids home where it's safer."

Now that's a perfectly reasonable thing to say. Except for one thing.

Her home was Brazil. She left Asia because Sars was suspected of having killed one person in her hometown. She moved to Brazil where 55,000 people are murdered every year. (And that's just in the kindergartens.)

This week is the fifth anniversary of Sars. In Singapore and Malaysia, people ate chili to immunise themselves. In Indonesia, lizards were the remedy of choice. In South Asia, magic potions were prescribed.

I still have my reporter's notebook for 2003, so let me take you back to how it all started.

February 11: "Six dead of mystery virus in Guangdong" a newspaper reported.

February 12: The new killer virus was deadly but "not as serious as rumoured," a Guangdong health official said. Only in China can virus be fatal but not serious.

February 13: I visit my local supermarket and see people fighting to buy white vinegar, which is rumoured to cure the mystery virus.

February 14: The Chinese press reveals there have been no deaths from the virus but several people have died trying to inhale white vinegar.

March 10: At home, this reporter's infant prodigy asks why a resident of our apartment block is now wearing a mask. "Don't worry, it's just our neighbourhood bank robber," I quip.

March 11: Widespread hysteria breaks out. Infant prodigy informs me that her school has been taken over entirely by bank robbers.

March 20: The Hong Kong government orders all buses to jam windows open to improve ventilation and let germs out.

March 22: Passengers suffer

carbon monoxide poisoning as they sit in ultra-polluted traffic jams in buses bearing signs saying: "Windows open for health reasons."

April 1: Police arrest teenage prankster who puts out fake news alert saying "Hong Kong to be isolated from world."

April 2: World Health Organization orders that Hong Kong be isolated from the world.

June 2: Sars disappears from Asia, having caused fewer deaths than normal flu viruses.

Yes, it was a time of craziness. But looking back on it, there were things to smile about. Here are the Five Best Things About



The Two Months When Sars Ruled Asia.

1. Most Asian government officials looked better with masks on.

2. For a while, people with bad breath only tainted themselves.

3. Elevator-users in Asia stopped jabbing the "door close" button because they didn't want to touch anything.

4. Mothers-in-law all over the world cancelled plans to visit their offspring in Asia.

5. If you wanted more personal space, all you had to do was cough.

I felt like a movie star whenever I travelled by air. People in first class got seats 24 inches wide. Business class passengers got seats 19 inches wide. In economy, I had the whole cabin and all the stewardesses to myself.

And I wasn't drinking white vinegar.

Tomorrow: How Asians secretly "fix" Hollywood movies.

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